Learning From Each Other ? Reflections of a Jew

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Learning From Each Other – Reflections of a Jew

David Rosen

I would like to make some general comments on “learning from the other” religious tradition/s, before addressing the specific learning that I have been asked to focus upon; namely, what Jews may learn from Christians.

As we all know there are those within our Faith Traditions who are not interested in and even opposed to dialogue. I think that is a pity – it generally reflects a sense of insecurity in the wider human cultural context. As I discovered personally, the interreligious encounter enormously broadens one’s spiritual vistas. Many of those opposed to dialogue (to their own loss), believe that there is nothing worth learning about outside their own Traditions. There are also those who are fearful that dialogue may undermine specific Faith commitment. However while all real living encounter involves “risk” (which is not at all necessarily a negative thing); I believe that interreligious encounter actually strengthens the commitments of those who are truly and knowledgeably rooted in their respective Traditions. In requiring one to be able to define and articulate one’s own commitments, one deepens one’s self understanding.

But there is also a popular approach, even amongst many interfaith practitioners themselves, which in my opinion, prevents a deeper learning about one another. This is the popular tendency towards a minimilization of difference, to the point of viewing all religions as basically the same in essence, if that essence is distinguished from what is portrayed as the superficial in the different religions. In my opinion this approach itself is superficial and sometimes is a form of cultural arrogance: but it is not an especially helpful approach if we really want to seriously learn from one another. Certainly we are able to discern important shared values and principles in the different religious traditions, but these do not make us all the same! When I say that this approach may manifest cultural arrogance, I mean that in stating that we are all basically the same, I am making my own subjective understanding of my own faith tradition/heritage, the sole criterion for a positive value judgment of others. That in fact is a reflection of the paucity of my own horizons, curiosity and openness, if I can only appreciate and respect those who are very much like me. Actually I am thereby minimalizing the value of the very diversity of the Divine Universe of human society and its various forms of spiritual expression.

However there is an almost diametrically opposed approach to dialogue which I believe is also unhelpful and is common in certain intellectual circles today. This is the approach of what is known as post-modernism. The bottom line here is paradoxically often echoed mutatis mutandis by pre-modernists who believe that there is nothing to dialogue about because anyway there can only be one possessor of Truth and they are it!

The post-modernist approach declares that each religion or culture is a completely self-contained system that expresses itself in a particular language and pattern of symbols. Within that whole, the

meaning of every word or symbol can only be understood in relation to other words and symbols that make up the complete system. This leads people to say that interfaith dialogue is impossible because the participants are never talking the same language or mean the same things.

I do not think that this theory is totally devoid of any value; as certainly much is lost in translation whether verbal or cultural, and we need to be wary of simplistic attempts in this regard. Nevertheless those of us who are deeply engaged in interreligious dialogue will treat this theory overall in the same dismissive way as Benjamin Franklin treated the postulates of Bishop Berkley – experience teaches us otherwise! Anyone who is genuinely engaged in interfaith encounter knows that even if we do not always have the language, terminology and experience to understanding everything in another religious culture the way it is understood within itself, this does not mean that we cannot learn from one another.

I, no doubt like most of you, can testify to profound learning that I have gained from other Faith Traditions, often receiving understandings about the nature of reality that I did not and may never have learnt from within my own Tradition. We actually discover the possibility and experience the enrichment of communication across such systemic divides, denying the very idea that we are destined to have to live in exclusively different cultural, linguistic systems without being able to understand and interact with one another in any meaningful way – an idea which both falsely denies us the enrichment of such dialogue, as well as the promotion of true global understanding and wellbeing.

It seems to me that in order to truly learn from one another we need to be able to celebrate and learn from our diversity; neither viewing one another as being simply the same on the one hand; nor on the other hand claiming that we actually cannot communicate with one another anyway. At the same time, in order for a person of faith to learn from other faith traditions, both theological humility and hope are needed. The humility of recognizing that one Tradition cannot encapsulate the totality of the Divine and the hope of encountering the Divine even beyond one's own Tradition in the wondrous and fabulous variety within the Divine Universe.

For me there has been much learning even in the most basic motives for interfaith encounter: namely, combating bigotry and misrepresentation. In seeking to combat prejudice and stereotypes in use against one's own Tradition, one often discovers the presence of such within oneself and one's own community, often unconscious. They may not be of the same order, but the encounter frequently reveals them to one in a way that one would not have seen before and as a result enables self-purification.

Beyond combating prejudice and bigotry there is a higher dimension of interfaith cooperation: namely, pursuing a common agenda of shared values. However cooperation is not only a matter of being greater than the sum of our different parts and a reflection of the depth of our sincere commitment to these values; it also facilitates deeper insight in the way these values are internalized and expressed within other Traditions.

But above and beyond these basic dimensions is the higher dimension of interreligious encounter as expressed in our shared Biblical teaching regarding the Divine Presence in the world. God is to be found within the Creation but above all within the human person created in the Divine Image. The Bible teaches us that the encounter with the other is thus in effect an encounter with the Divine.

But this is uniquely intense when this is an encounter with a person who experiences and manifests the sense of the Divine within her or his life. Such encounters offer us the opportunity to discover the Divine beyond our particular Traditions – and these are religious learning experiences in themselves. The religious importance of the human encounter has of course been extensively described by religious philosophers such as Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, Paul Celan,

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Jacques Maritain and indeed Pope John Paul II.

In all these general regards, Jews have much to learn from Christians as from others. But we also have much to learn specifically from Christians. It is true that Judaism does not need Christianity in order to fully understand itself, as opposed to Christianity's essential need to understand Judaism in order to understand itself. But this does not mean that Jews cannot learn from Christians; or that they should not relate to Christianity in a way in which they can learn from them.

Referring once again to the most basic motive for dialogue – combating prejudice and bigotry – it is here first and foremost that Jews should have the magnanimity to both laud and learn from the remarkable Christian process over the last fifty years of repudiation of anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism that had so infected Christianity over the millennia. While one does not fully expurgate almost two thousand years in fifty, it is true to say that the transformation, the teshuva, the metanoia, is one of the most amazing, if not the most impressive ideological revolution of all times. What we in my community should learn from this, is the importance and necessity of self-criticism even when it relates to the most intimate religious attachments of one's religious and cultural identity – even when there is a danger that elements hostile to us, may exploit this to our detriment. Constructive criticism of an institution, state, or whatever, does not have to mean disloyalty. Indeed it can be the very reverse. Constructive criticism that seeks positive change, reflects the truest loyalty and devotion to the body politic concerned. So not to fear criticism of one's own loyalties despite the dangers, is something that we can learn from our closest Christian friends of this modern era.

As far as the second level of dialogue is concerned – we would also do well to study and seek to emulate some of the ways and models in which ethical values that we share from our common source, are implemented within Christian contexts. One does not have to go as far as Calcutta to Mother Theresa's community to see remarkable expressions of human devotion inspired by Christian religious faith. These are to be found on our own doorstep and call for emulation, mutatis mutandis, each in her or his own communal context, both for those within one's community and beyond it.

But I believe that there is much more that we can and should learn including about ourselves, through the Christian-Jewish relationship

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg has described Judaism and Christianity as two Midrashim (homiletical expositions) on a common text – the Hebrew Bible. This appears to me to be a very useful formula – from a Jewish perspective – in our Jewish encounter with Christianity.

One of the things it implies is that we can and I believe should, be able to illumine one another in our own understanding of our own religious heritage and teaching.

This has generally not been possible for us in the past as a result of the pain and burden of our tragic historic experience of Christianity nurtured by rivalry degenerating into contempt and persecution, which prevented us from being able to view Christian teaching or even the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth, in a positive light. Being able to do so now (at least for those of us who are now able and desirous of doing so) enables us not only to recognize Jesus of Nazareth as a Jewish brother and teacher, but also to re-emphasize fundamental values and teachings of our own that have often been muted as a result of the polemical encounter and competition with Christianity. Jesus' emphasis upon love and reconciliation; on being prepared to suffer humiliation rather than humiliate; The Christian use of personal prayer, for example; are all fundamental Jewish teachings and practices, but which as I say have often been underemphasized in the face of the polemic with Christianity. As we free ourselves of the shackles and heal ourselves of the wounds of past persecution and conflict; and as we enjoy the fruits of cooperation and mutual esteem, we can learn much from Christian teaching (albeit as opposed to much of the conduct of

those who have claimed to be Christian), to recover, reaffirm and deepen, in our own understanding and expression of these fundamental Jewish concepts and teaching.

But beyond all this is the question of the special place that Christianity should have in Judaism's religious world view. While as mentioned, our negative encounter with Christianity has hardly lent itself to such, there have been those who have been able to view Christianity in a more noble light. Beyond Yehudah Halevi and Maimonides (twelfth and thirteenth centuries) who saw Christianity and Islam as a vehicle for bringing essential truths to humanity at large; and beyond Rabbi Menachem HaMeiri a century later who defines Christianity and Islam as true religion; scholars like Rabbi Moses Rivkes in the seventeenth century affirmed the unique relationship between Christianity and Judaism, long before modern Jewish philosophers like Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber. The latter's comment that "we share a book and a hope" were more than anticipated by Rivkes when he declared that Jews and Christians are bound together by the Hebrew Bible and its message of salvation, revelation and full Messianic expectation. But arguably the boldest of all these pre-modern, Orthodox Rabbinic theologians, was the great Rabbi Jacob Emden at the turn of the eighteenth century who described Christianity with the Mishnaic designation as a "knessiyah leshem shamayim shesofa lehitkayam", a gathering for the sake of Heaven, of lasting validity. (Actually the Hebrew word "knessiyah" is a translation for "church" – so in fact Emden is referring to Christianity as a Church for the sake of Heaven that is part of Divine purpose for humanity at large!) Incidentally, Emden's theological affirmation of Christianity goes well beyond the vision articulated in Dabru Emet – the positive statement about Christianity drawn up by a group of American Jewish scholars, signed by hundreds of rabbis and other Jewish scholars, and issued three years ago – which elicited such a positive response from our Christian partners.

Emden goes beyond his aforementioned predecessors in not just seeing Christianity as bringing truths of Judaism to the rest of the world; but in seeing it as having its own salvific character. If this is the case, then how might we understand the relationship between Christianity and Judaism in a way that the former has something to teach the latter as well as vice versa? As I have indicated, until recently the question could not have even been raised by most Jews, let alone considered. Notwithstanding Emden's remarkable theological vision, the tragic negative historical experience overwhelmed even any familiarity with Emden's position itself, let alone any willingness to consider its theological implications!

Nevertheless the achievements of the past fifty years in Christian-Jewish reconciliation have now begun to open up new understandings of the complementary relationship of Christianity and Judaism which may enable us to learn from our Christian colleagues in ways not envisioned before. This means assuming not only that there is Divine design and purpose in our complimentarity, but also trying to understand what God is saying to us in this! Such efforts at understanding our complementarity have included seeing Judaism and Christianity in a parallel role in which the Jewish focus on the communal covenant with God and the Christian focus on the individual relationship with God may serve to balance one another. Others have seen the complementary relationship in that Christians need the Jewish reminder that the Kingdom of Heaven has not yet fully arrived, while Jews need the Christian awareness that in some ways that Kingdom has already rooted itself in the here and now. Another view of the mutual complementarity portrays Judaism as a constant admonition to Christianity regarding the dangers of triumphalism, while Christianity's universalistic character may serve an essential role for Judaism in warning against degeneration into insular isolationism. As opposed to the underlying assumptions of the latter, there is a contention that it is actually Christianity's universalism that jars with a culturally pluralistic reality in the modern world. The communal autonomy that Judaism affirms, it is suggested, may serve more appropriately as a model for a multicultural society, while Christianity may provide a better response for individual alienation in the modern world.

These perspectives open up new ways in which Christian teaching may not only illumine Jewish

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understanding of the former, but also contribute to our own self understanding and improvement.

In conclusion I would like to reiterate the importance and great potential of shared religious study (which of course in Judaism, is a sacred endeavor – even more than prayer!), in keeping with Greenberg's above-mentioned description, of Christianity and Judaism as two Midrashim on a common text. While these different exegeses contain theological positions that are irreconcilable and make us the different Faith Traditions that we are; precisely because they are based upon the shared text of the Hebrew Bible, we are able if we choose, not only to enjoy the illumination of the other's tradition, but also to plumb the unlimited richness of the Hebrew Scriptures themselves, out of a shared religious commitment to them.

In this regard let me quote in full, the reference from Martin Buber that I mentioned earlier in part:

"We have in common a book and an expectation. To you the book is a forecourt; to us it is the sanctuary. But in this place we can dwell together and together listen to the voice that speaks here. That means that together we can strive to evoke the buried speech of that voice; together we can redeem the imprisoned living word."

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Rabbi David Rosen is a former President of the International Council of Christians and Jews